

REFORM OR REVOLUTION.

AN ADDRESS

TO THE LORDS AND COMMONS OF ENGLAND IN
PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED.

MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN :

It is with the most profound respect, and with the deepest veneration, for the noble section of your most honourable Houses that I venture thus to address you, and if in the course of the few following pages I may sometimes appear lacking in true humility, you must remember that I am only one of the common people—one of those whom you not unjustifiably taunt with ignorance, one who lacks the polish of classical training, and who can only coin his thoughts into rough English phrases. I shall not in this brief address profess to discuss whether or not the great mass of the nation are or are not entitled to take part in the election of representatives to Parliament. I believe that in England the time for such discussion has passed, the people are convinced of their right, and for you I shall here assume that the consent of the majority, every citizen having the right to vote, is necessary to constitute a lawful government, that in truth the people are the only lawful source of governmental authority and that every man unconvicted of crime, of full age, and not in receipt of parochial relief, and whose residence has been registered in the electoral district in which his vote is to be exercised, has not only an indubitable right, but an imperative duty to vote in the election of the national assembly of legislators. The mass of the people being kept without votes, they are politically dead, they are servants not citizens, serfs not freemen. No man is justified in resigning any of the rights or neglecting any of the duties of his citizenship, much less are any privileged few justified in combining to prevent the mass of the nation from acquiring political rights or performing political duties. The will of the individual or the wishes of a petty class, however rich, have not, nor can they have any right to negate and destroy the national will. The few have no lawful authority or excuse for usurping to themselves, as a

sort of family privilege, the right to govern the many. Lawful Government only existing with the concurrence or possibility of concurrence of the whole of the inhabitants of the country, all other Government is unlawful usurpation and tyranny. These are propositions which the nation regards as too clear for further disputation, and which it will soon seek to enforce; it has talked long enough, and the time for doing something beyond talking has now arrived. My object in this address is to suggest to you the unadvisability of a longer resistance on your part to the popular demand, a demand which has hitherto been expressed with much moderation, and to point out to you, how you—if you refuse to listen to the pleading cry for political life—may be compelled to do immediate justice to the nation. I am not vain enough to expect that any large number of the occupants of your lordships' house will pay much attention to this address, because, knowing as I do—for even the common people have begun to understand the real history of the British aristocracy—that in a large number of cases the origin of your grand titles has been of a most dishonourable and unworthy nature, it is too much to expect the stream to be entirely free from the viciousness inherent in its source—a man who is a peer because his great grandfather was rich enough seventy years ago to buy four boroughs, can hardly be expected to have very exalted notions on the subject of parliamentary representation. An individual whose baron's dignity was called into being, under the corrupt administration of Pitt, in order to vote down all wise and liberal measures, ought not, I admit, to be required to hold any very superior views as to legislative duties. A peer whose marquissate or dukedom had its foundation in a king's lust, and a woman's pretty face and lack of virtue, may be pardoned for not knowing what ought to constitute the true nobility of a nation. An earldom going back to the times when might governed in lieu of law, and force was the substitute for reason, does not necessarily bring to its modern holder the purest ideas of honesty and justice. A peer's estate acquired from an ill-gotten pension, must be a sad dead weight in the race for real honour. And I think all these cases may be found in any full gathering of your Lordships' most noble body.

To the ecclesiastical section of your Lordships' house, I

am indeed a most humble suppliant. I know the great value of the words of wisdom uttered by the mitred occupants of seats in the pleasant Westminster Chamber, and hesitate to pen one unworthy word against the prelatich bench. It was a Bishop of Rochester, I think, who said "that he did not know what the mass of the people had to do with the laws but to obey them;" and we are all aware how ably Archbishops and Bishops are in the habit of vindicating the claims of the labouring classes to political enfranchisement.

There are some Lords who, from their special position, ought not only to listen to the people, but who might fairly be expected to advocate the popular cause. I mean those who have risen from comparatively low estate by means of a most honourable profession to the judicial bench, and so have gained their baron's title; but even here are found a large minority who have eaten party dirt in their path to national dignity. The senate chamber of a nation should be the place of assemblage of the *élite* of the nation. No hereditary legislators should crowd its narrow limits, but it should be filled by life peers chosen for their manhood, for their intellect, for their courage, for their patriotism, for their devotion to their country's welfare. Our House of Peers should not be a gilt sham, gaudy in its outside pretension and worthless in its intrinsic value; it should be an assembly of men ennobled by their genius; titled by their endeavours to alleviate human misery, and to redress human wrong; of men famous in science, art, and literature, and whose decorations should not be the tinsel of stars, lace, and ribbons, but the more enduring fame which should keep their memories dear long after their bones had rotted in the grave.

My Lords, I pray you stand not any longer between the people and political liberty. Your traditions are of obstinate obstructiveness. Forego your old policy and be just. Abandon your old tactics and be generous. The people desire peace, not strife. Each hour wasted in out-door agitation means less bread earned for the wife and family at home. I entreat you, my Lords, prolong not the conflict till the popular patience is entirely exhausted. Forget that you are lords, and meet your fellows like men, and in such a meeting the wrongs of the past would be forgotten, and the hopes of the future would alone be regarded. In the past

there are some precedents for such greatness ; let not 1867 be behind 1796. There were Dukes to advocate manhood suffrage then, and have we not one to-day ?

To you, gentlemen of the House of Commons, I shall speak with more freedom. You ought to be the representatives of the people, and should therefore be at least sometimes accustomed to hear plain language from unpolished men. The present struggle is not between the people and the Tories, it is one against both Whig and Tory—it is between you, the Parliament, and the people ; for you do not represent the nation, you have made yourselves a class against the nation. Some of you may be the nominees of dukes, earls, marquises, and barons for boroughs in which the voters are political serfs, and to such of you I declare that you are a dishonour to our country, a disgrace to our House of Commons. Why should a man shamelessly profess to represent a borough and talk in a debate of his constituents, when in his heart of hearts he well knows that he only represents a marquis or a duke, and that the inhabitants of the borough for which he nominally sits had no more voice in his selection than they had in the choice of any other portion of the following of the Most Noble the Marquis of Telle-telle ? To those of you who owe your seats to your money, and who have bribed the miserable shopkeepers and beer-sellers who gave you in return your position as temporary legislators, I declare that you are worse criminals than the thieves whose offences are recorded in our ordinary calendars of crime. The educated scoundrels of rank and fashion, who corrupt and degrade the political vitality of a nation by bribing voters, ought to be subjected to the most severe and degrading punishments. You vote to continue the infamous practice of flogging in the army, and, much as I object to the use of the lash, I would vote to introduce it amongst our fashionable M.P.'s who have paid for the votes by which their return has been ensured. If there had been no other reason for the agitation for reform in the representation of the people, it would have been found in the fact that men who have been morally convicted of bribery sit on the benches of St. Stephen's, and that their honourable coadjutors greet with laughter references to their particular misdoings. In a thieves' kitchen the suspicion of the adroit practice of

pocket-picking is no disgrace, and in the House of Commons it is apparently no greater disgrace to be suspected of having obtained one's seat in Parliament by adroit bribery. Some of you owe your seats, not to the free choice of the voters, but to special influences brought to bear upon them. Threats of eviction from a large landholder are often as potent as a bribe in influencing a vote, and it must be a strange sense of honour which permits a man to sit as the representative of voters who have to record their votes or lose their farms. Some of you represent banking interests, some of you are the advocates of insurance interests, many of you are the advocates of railway enterprise, or have your seats to watch the interests of docks or gas companies. Some of you are younger sons of noble families, some military men, and many lawyers desiring advancement; there are, alas! few out of your number who even desire to represent the people, and those of you who are really fair parliamentary representatives are only enough to mark the wretched character of the bulk. You are a House of Commons in name, but not in fact; and if you seek to prevent the reform which shall make our constitution a reality, you will provoke a revolution which shall sweep away your obstinate policy of obstructiveness.

Gentlemen, in your late discussions on the wretchedly impotent Tory measure now before the House—I cannot call it a Tory Reform Bill—you have nearly all of you spoken as though the advent in any large numbers of the people to political life, were an event to be dreaded and avoided. The present Chancellor of the Exchequer confesses that the Bill he introduces, and in which he uses household suffrage as a catchword, while by clogs and checks he makes the measure worse than useless, is not intended to give to a democracy any real influence in the formation of the government of the country. Mr. Disraeli desires that the governing class shall still remain a class unconnected with the people. The late Chancellor of the Exchequer while professing, and as I believe honestly professing, a wish for wide enfranchisement—uneducated by the failure of his last bill, which we supported for its honest intent rather than for any benefit it gave us—adheres to a half-hearted and contemptible rating qualification. Neither Disraeli nor Gladstone represent the popular demand, and the only reason for trust in the member for

South Lancashire is, that we do believe in his candour, a quality entirely lacking in the Conservative leader. The Tory traditions will not permit any amity with real reform; Whig history speaks more of enfranchisement for the middle classes, than of any disposition to grant political freedom to the toiling millions. The nation are growing tired and disgusted with the part of lookers, on during parliamentary struggles between one or other great Whig family and its following, and one or other great Tory family and its adherents, struggles which are contests for office rather than endeavours for political advancement, and which end in nothing but delay. From 1790 till to-day, this reform movement has been gradually growing stronger and wiser, and it is now too strong to be pushed aside any longer, and the men who compose it are too wise to permit you to trifle with it further. At first, your parliamentary system was strong enough in its tyranny, and base enough in its cowardice, to sentence men to transportation for the honest advocacy of manhood suffrage and for denunciation of governmental corruption. But 1867 is freer than 1793, and Muir, Margat, and Winterbottom, would have been safe to-day in their advocacy of Parliamentary Reform. Our brethren of labour, rough-handed and warm-hearted, have, despite your opposition, done something to raise themselves socially during the last half century. Bentham, Thelwall, Paine, Hunt, Cobbett, and Burdett, whom your predecessors prosecuted by way of logical refutation, have with their pens and tongues taught lessons in political science which are now bearing fruit. You can no longer fight our movement by the help of police-concocted treasons: the day is past when such wretched tools of your class governments as the infamous Edwards, or an Oliver, or a Castles, or a Popay might with lying tongue hinder our progress and murder our movement. We do not conspire to-day and plan revolt in secret for miserable spies to report to you; we debate our proposed course in public, and you may read the story in the cheap press which the poor man cheapened against your will. We gather on the green sward—we shall have to gather there as a People's Parliament, denying that you are the parliament of the nation; and we will gather there with or without your permission, for it is our right. Hyde Park or Woodhouse Moor are both good meeting

places for a quarter of a million of men, but Hyde Park is the best, because you can see us meet, and you can judge whether the unenfranchised returning home from a political gathering are worse conducted than yourselves coming back from the Derby or a prize fight, and at our meetings in future one proposition, at least, will be prominent, viz., that you, my Lords and Gentlemen, having persistently refused reform—you having refused to listen to our remonstrances, and having denied our ability to enforce our wishes, it is our duty to commence some more effective agitation against you ; and one of the steps of open hostility to you will be the proposal that the people refuse to be robbed any longer in the name of a government which ignores their existence except as taxpayers.

At the present moment in Great Britain, where vast wealth and frightful poverty jostle in the streets, an enormous amount of taxation, much of which is extravagantly and uselessly expended, is levied on the country, and the great share of this burden of taxation ultimately and truly falls upon the unrepresented millions. Taxation is a boastful performance for a legislature and ministry who sit without consulting the mass of the people ; it is a baneful subject for a people powerless in the State. To tax a man without his concurrence, without listening to his objections, without his having any voice in the nomination of the tax leviers, is clearly robbery, and if you will not be honest, the people must refuse to be robbed. If you will not reform the representation, then the unenfranchised taxpayers will revolt. If they must not have the right to vote, they will not regard it as a duty to pay. Our revolution can legitimately commence by cutting off the supplies, and this may be done by turning the tax-gatherer from the door from one end of England to the other. All imperial rates might be resolutely refused, and as large landowners might increase their rentals to meet extraordinary taxation, it would become necessary to take measures to prevent the continuance of any indirect taxation until a real Reform measure be carried. Then, my Lords and Gentlemen, if you choose to remain obstructives, you can sustain the expenditure of the Crown, the army and navy, and pay your own pensions by contributions from your own purses. Perhaps you

would then listen more attentively to Mr. Seeley's remonstrances on dockyard waste.

This advocacy of a refusal to pay taxes may seem to you the advocacy of a measure violent and extreme; believe me, it is no more violent, no more extreme, than your refusal to permit the tax-payers to share in the election of those whose decision determines the amount and nature of the taxation. M. de Lafayette once said that "tranquillity under the yoke of despotism is servile cowardice, and resistance the most sacred of all duties." You may reply, or think without replying, that the proposal to resist the collection of the imperial taxes is only an empty threat, but I entreat you not so to regard it. You in your debates have taunted the people, and although they remain calm under the insult, they have not forgotten your mocking words; they waited, and no good came from their patience; they trusted, and you have betrayed their trust; they hoped, and you mocked their hopefulness; they were quiet, and you taunted them with apathy: and now to-day they are tired of waiting, they have in you neither trust nor confidence, they have met in their thousands—counties, cities, boroughs, and villages, all have spoken or are speaking, and their words are growing sterner and stronger. Public opinion manifests itself slowly, but woe to those who resist its almost universal expression. The people will have reform, and it must be no sham, no juggler's trick, pleasant in word and hollow in practice. The people will have no more wretched talk of checks and counterbalancings; they will have a real, wide, *bonâ fide* measure of reform. They ask a vote for honest, resident, industrious manhood, and if you dally longer, if you trifle much further with their appeal you will be greeted with the terrible news that in obstinately and wickedly preventing reform you have been madly provoking revolution.

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